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Lower levels expected in Lake Erie this summer

By John Bartlett
Staff writer

Another summer of wide beaches and boating hazards on Lake Erie appears likely because the lake's level is expected to remain below long-term averages.

In fact, Lake Erie will likely be at lower levels during the coming boating season than it was last summer, when the lowest levels in decades were recorded, said Adam Fox, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Great Lakes hydrologist.

"It will be another year boaters need to watch what they are doing and make sure they have the latest charts," Fox said. "There won't be much room for error."

If weather conditions are average this spring, the level of Lake Erie in June is expected to be about 8 inches below where it was the same time in 2000. In July, it is expected to be about 10 inches lower than in 2000.

That would place Lake Erie's levels this summer at about a foot below the long-term average for the months of June and July, according to U.S. Army Corps data.

An unusually wet spring could bring the lake to very near the levels seen last year, but still below the long-term average of 601.67 feet for June and 602.17 feet for July. Those averages are based on data collected since 1918, Fox said.

A dry spring could drop the lake to about 570 feet, according to Army Corps estimates.

Lake Erie rises and falls with the seasons. It is at its lowest level in December, January and February, and at its highest in June, July and August.

Currently, Lake Erie stands at about 570.3 feet, or about half a foot below the long-term February average of 570.83 feet. "Our projections for Lake Erie is you should not do too badly as far as the spring rise goes," Fox said. "You did perk up about 4 inches from the 9th of February from the rain and snow melt ... the 9th and 10th, but the end state is you are still looking at about 5 inches below the average for this time of year."

The Great Lakes basin has continued to see below-average precipitation and it remains drier than average throughout the watershed, including in the ground. The result is the prediction of continued low lake levels this summer, Fox said.

While in 2000 the lake fell below long-term averages, it turned out that during the boating season it was not as low as predicted.

"What happened last year to really help out was in March and April we had several weeks of above-average precipitation to help the levels come up faster than on the average," Fox said. "However, during the fall on Lake Erie because of strong evaporation, a result of the colder than normal November and December, lake levels fell faster than they normally would."

The highest water levels on Lake Erie were recorded in 1986 and 1987. The lowest recorded levels on Lake Erie occurred in 1934 and 1935, according to U.S. Army Corps data.

The lake was at unusually high levels throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, and the result was considerable erosion and shoreline damage. In 1998, lake levels dropped significantly below long-term averages. That created problems for pleasure boaters, commercial navigation and marina operators, Fox said.

"The last time we saw consistently low levels like this was in the 1960s," Fox said. "There are people who are really happy by this. They are the people who live along the lakeshore and have wide beaches and are not having to worry about losing their property in every storm."

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